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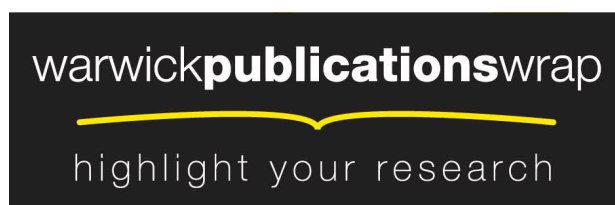
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‘This is FilmFour – Not Some Cheesy Pseudo-Hollywood Thing!’: The Opening Night Simulcast of FilmFour on Channel 4

Hannah Andrews

Abstract:

Channel 4's tradition of supporting, promoting and contributing to British cinema culture entered a new phase in 1998. Its film-making operations were consolidated into a single, semi-vertically integrated studio called FilmFour. On 1 November it launched a brand-new pay-TV channel of the same name. This channel programmed a variety of cinema, premiering world cinema films, FilmFour's own productions and independent films. It was the first digital channel in Britain affiliated to a public service broadcaster. The new channel was introduced on its opening night with a simultaneous broadcast with terrestrial Channel 4. Scheduled on this evening was a representative selection of films and programmes to entice viewers to take up the new channel, including the UK television premiere of *The Usual Suspects* (1995). This article presents a detailed textual analysis of this opening night simulcast. It examines how the new channel was presented to the audience, focusing particularly on interstitial material: the introductory programme, interviews with well-known faces from the British film industry, and additional material broadcast between the films. Evaluating the evening's output, the paper argues that the opening night simulcast represented both a marketing tool for the new channel and a means of extending the Channel 4 corporation's brand. This article offers a case study in how a public service broadcaster began to negotiate for itself a space in the new digital broadcasting environment by targeting a specific, discriminating audience.

Keywords: British television; film on television; digital broadcasting; television branding; Channel 4; FilmFour; Film4.

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At Channel 4 there has been an enduring tradition of supporting, promoting and contributing to British film culture. During the 1980s, the broadcaster devoted relatively large portions of its budget to funding or part-funding low-budget films, initially designed for transmission on television in Britain and cinema release abroad. This policy developed gradually into the financing, production and distribution of films in British cinemas, with Channel 4 still benefiting from the rights to the first television transmission of its films. Thus, Channel 4 influenced film culture at both the levels of production and exhibition, providing a certain space for British cinema to be seen, even if it was not in cinemas. In 1998, the relationship between Channel 4 and cinema culture entered a new phase when its film-making operations were consolidated and separated from the main channel into a semi-vertically integrated mini-studio, called FilmFour. And, in November of that year, a new film channel of the same name was launched. It promised to expand upon Channel 4's existing commitment to film culture, providing a daily service from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. with all films uninterrupted by commercials. However, unlike the main channel, FilmFour was to be a premium subscriber service, broadcasting on satellite, cable, digital satellite and (one month later) the new digital terrestrial platform, ONDigital.

In this article I will investigate the promotion of the new digital channel to potential customers, primarily by analysing the opening night programming, transmitted on 1 November 1998 as a simultaneous broadcast between the cable channel and terrestrial Channel 4. It aims to position FilmFour within the history of Channel 4, in terms of its remit, its commercial structure (as it developed during the late 1990s) its institutional 'brand', and its relationship with cinema culture. The opening night simulcast, described by Stephen Armstrong in *The Sunday Times*, *Culture Section*, 1 November 1988, as a 'breathhtakingly saucy piece of cross-marketing', presented the new channel via a number of different means. I will therefore explore the presentational strategies that were employed in the short opening programme and in some of the interstitial material broadcast between the films. The article will also focus on three themes of the evening: first, the implied distinction between FilmFour's content and Hollywood cinema through satiric deconstruction of Hollywood's extra-textual modes of presentation; second, the opening night's 'live' special event status; and finally, the appeal to a specific audience's sense of identity positioned in relation to cinema consumption, with a particular focus on young males. Finally, I will consider how Channel 4's status as a commercial, heterogeneous public service broadcaster

may relate to the process of promoting a new channel, to which access is restricted for a large portion of the broadcast television audience.

Before beginning the analysis of the opening night programming, it is important to establish the industrial and institutional context in which FilmFour was launched. Throughout the 1990s, there was an increasing sense of threat to established broadcasting institutions from multi-channel satellite and cable television. These operate under significantly different business models to traditional broadcast television: rather than depending solely on revenue from advertising, the subscriber model offers satellite and cable broadcasters a steady income. As Amanda D. Lotz notes of American cable television, 'these models contribute substantially to the different programming possibilities afforded to these different types of networks' (2007: 89). Freed from the imperatives of public service broadcasting to provide a mixed schedule catering to a wide range of tastes, cable and satellite providers have tended to cater for niche audiences by theming channels. In the UK, a priority in multi-channel broadcasting had always been to provide channels dedicated to recent popular movies, with Sky being a virtually monopoly provider of this kind of service. Alongside live sports broadcasts, films were perceived as commodities for which subscribers would be willing to pay a premium.

The take-up of multi-channel television was slow in Britain relative to the United States. In 1998, still only a minority of British television-owning homes were able to receive satellite or cable television: 6.59 million out of a total of 23.7 million television-owning homes.¹ The perception and fear among broadcasters was, however, that when *digital* multi-channel broadcasting was introduced at the end of that year, the rules of the game would change irrevocably. Widespread multi-channel TV was coming, whether the British public wanted it or not, and the options for established broadcasters appeared to be evolve or expire. Under a new chief executive, Michael Jackson, Channel 4 began to make significant changes to its corporate structure, programming policy and broadcasting strategy and, as Georgina Born points out, 'a number of executives from pay television and strategists with management consultancy backgrounds were recruited' (2003: 779). This led Channel 4 to venture into web-based media and pay-TV, a policy designed both to shore up the company financially and to spread some of its existing remit commitments among new digital platforms. The film channel was the first part of this plan to be put into action, and FilmFour was, as Born notes, a response 'to pressure from the ITC that C4 should show more foreign-language films, as well as building on C4's expertise' (ibid.: 786). However, this is not all the film

channel, intentionally or not, accomplished for the broadcaster; as I will show, it also helped to consolidate and extend the corporation's media brand.

Branding became an increasingly central strategy for media companies during the 1990s. As Catherine Johnson puts it:

In the era of TVIII (sometimes referred to as the digital era of US television), a time of deregulation and multimedia conglomeration, when the expansion of television networks has made competition for audiences increasingly fierce, it seems that branding has emerged as the defining industrial practice. (2007:6)

Born suggests that the expansion of Channel 4's identity into a coherent, recognisable brand with knowable products was a central feature of its defensive strategy: 'The strategic plan argued for C4's diversification through extending its "core reputation" as a brand, considered to centre on four strengths: film, entertainment, sports and factual' (2003: 779). Clearly, FilmFour responded to one of these strengths, both adding to and trading on Channel 4's overall brand identity. As Maggie Brown describes in her 'biography' of Channel 4, branding was a key strategy to attract customers and to compensate for the channel's blunted competitive edge over Sky Movies in terms of product:

The channel never had access to the new films and Hollywood blockbuster premieres acquired by its rival, Sky Movies, but it was still asking for a substantial monthly fee. So it relied heavily on brand expectations, the established Channel 4 image. (2007: 242-3)

Branding not only works by differentiating one channel from another and indicating the particular niche to which the channel caters, it also creates a powerful sense of identification between buyer and producer. Brand identity is an important tool in attracting subscribers to digital/cable networks. Banet-Weiser et al. suggest that branded networks cultivate a 'sense of belonging', arguing that 'it is not so much the programs on the individual channels that are important, but the designs for the channel themselves' (2007: 9). Thus, designing a channel to carry a particular identificatory brand is a key strategy for media companies in the competitive multi-channel environment.

With the use of commercial strategies influenced by the world of management consultancy and profit-oriented business, there is also a political dimension to Channel 4's decision to become an aggressive player in the multi-channel world. In her analysis of various strategy

discourses among management at Channel 4 during the late 1990s and early 2000s, Georgina Born identifies the prevalence of 'the idea that there is no contradiction in a PSB engaging fully in commercial as well as non-commercial activities' (2003: 780). However, creating and maintaining a particular media brand necessarily involves some level of exclusion—by identifying a specific audience, the brand also must marginalise other audiences. Channel 4's traditional *modus operandi* was, of course, to cater for specific, minority or niche audiences: at its inception in 1982, it was designed as a corrective to the generalist, homogenous and increasingly 'safe' public service duopoly of the BBC and ITV companies. Without the imperative for a balanced schedule, and with a supposedly lighter-touch approach to impartiality—both cornerstones of national public service broadcasting—Channel 4 had more freedom to address particular sections of a national public conceived of as multicultural and heterogeneous. However, by the end of the 1990s, this mandate to target a wide range of specific minorities was becoming increasingly skewed towards the younger end of the television market—18–34-year-olds—and the top-end ABC1 demographic. A similar market was targeted by FilmFour.

FilmFour was carried on the Sky Digital and Sky analogue satellite packages as well as on OnDigital, Britain's first doomed foray into digital terrestrial broadcasting. It cost around £6 per month, which was rather expensive for a single channel package, and this had consequences for the levels of take-up.² However, as Born notes, there were two main incentives for FilmFour to go premium as opposed to 'basic tier'. The first was financial: the film rights for premium channels are cheaper, and can be sold on to terrestrial (or, in the case of FilmFour, bought as a package for FilmFour and the main Channel 4). Moreover, the earnings are higher, because each subscriber pays exclusively for that channel. The second consideration is broadly cultural. As Born states: 'Premium status yields substantial cultural cachet' (2003: 786); in other words, the channel builds on a reputation for cutting-edge quality. FilmFour thus had to be promoted to a small number of self-conscious, discerning consumers, and the following analysis of the opening night programme will suggest some ways in which the channel began to do this.

The evening schedule comprised four films: *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* (1994), which starred Johnny Depp and Leonardo DiCaprio; the British television premiere of the thriller *The Usual Suspects* (1995); Peter Greenaway's 1996 film *The Pillow Book*; and the Nanni Moretti auto-biopic *Caro Diario/Dear Diary* (1993). Broadcast between these films were a puppet spoof of the biggest recent blockbuster *Titanic*

(1997), in *Adam and Joe's FilmFour Special*; a 'making-of' documentary about *The Usual Suspects*; and brief interviews with and talking heads of British film and television personalities. The evening started with a short introductory programme hosted by television personality Johnny Vaughan. This lasted around fifteen minutes and comprised of a series of monologues by the presenter about the new channel, 'interviews' and appearances by famous faces from British film, mingled with promotional adverts for the FilmFour channel which were illustrated by clips from the films. The following discussion highlights three key features of the opening night programming: satiric deconstruction of Hollywood, the faking of a 'live' special event, and addressing a particular kind of audience: one that is male, young and upmarket.

FilmFour needed to be marketed in a way that might help it compete with other movie channels available in abundance (and rather more cheaply) on the Sky satellite package. Sky had long-term output deals with all the major and minor Hollywood studies, which meant that they effectively had a monopoly on first-run pay-TV rights to the most desirable film content. Therefore, FilmFour entered a market with a powerful leader with which it could not, by virtue of its relative size and budget, compete directly. The best option was to define the channel by its difference. This was expressed in press reports on FilmFour in the weeks leading up to the launch as an effort to complement rather than compete with Sky. 'We're not in competition with Sky,' a Channel 4 spokesman insisted in the *Telegraph* on 8 October 1998; 'FilmFour is a completely different proposition' (Gritten, 1998). This definition by difference emerges even in the choice of the name FilmFour: a contraction of 'Film ON 4', Channel 4's long-term slot for film broadcast, which helpfully utilises the appellation 'film' to contrast with Sky's 'movie' channels. It was also important for Channel 4 not to pursue an aggressively competitive relationship with Sky Movies, since it relied on the Sky satellite and cable service to carry the FilmFour channel. Thus couching the relationship in terms of a 'complementary' service suggested mutual benefits on either side. However, the opening evening programme was far from complimentary about the kind of film output available on rival services, defining itself explicitly in opposition to Sky Movies' Hollywood-based output by mocking its modes of presentation.

Undermining Hollywood is the primary aim of the short opening night programme, the first minute of which is presented as a satire on the glitz and glamour of the Hollywood awards ceremony. Over a high angle long shot, a male voice-over states in an exaggeratedly theatrical tone: 'Live from Channel 4's London headquarters, FilmFour proudly

presents [a pause] FilmFour! An evening of cinematic pageantry with your host, a Mr Johnny Vaughn!' The host emerges from a silver Mercedes. He is dressed in top hat, dress coat and a white scarf, and smokes a large cigar. There is no diegetic sound, rather, a soundtrack of old-fashioned Hollywood-style music played by a full orchestra. Vaughn's gestures are exaggerated, including his interactions with a small crowd gathered outside. He is followed by a Steadicam keeping him in medium close-up. This occasionally switches to a point-of-view shot from Vaughn's perspective, allowing the viewer to see a group of paparazzi waiting outside the building. Vaughn interacts with this crowd, mimicking the kind of suave charisma associated with Hollywood stars at film premieres. He then proceeds to the doors of Channel 4's Horseferry Road headquarters, where he performs some comic business with the cigar, which is removed from him by a doorman before he enters the building. Vaughn moves through the backstage of a television studio, pompously giving orders to runners and other members of staff. As he finally reaches the stage door, the camera cuts to a long shot of a television studio kitted out with a podium, a screen and a small group of chairs, seemingly ready for a chat show. Vaughn approaches the podium to a fanfare of brass instruments which swells to a crescendo as he speaks his opening line: 'Welcome to a milestone night in the history of British film: the simulcast launch of FilmFour!'

This opening minute seems at once exaggerated and underwhelming. Whilst displaying icons of glamour like the red carpet and the Mercedes, or even the camera movement which replicates the frenzy of the paparazzi outside a glitzy ceremony, these seem rather haphazard, thrown together and, importantly, small: there is only a small crowd, and there are only a few paparazzi. The tone of the sequence is clearly comic: Vaughn's attire is hyperbolically formal, and attention is drawn particularly to the top hat and cigar—traditional icons of Hollywood glamour. His gait is humorous, he mugs to the camera, winking and reacting to the false 'crowd' gathered outside the building. Vaughn's silliness is, however, juxtaposed with what might be read as genuine attempts to make the Channel 4 headquarters appear grand and impressive: very large FilmFour banners decorate the walls of the building and there is, indeed, a red carpet. This sets up a conflict between the tone of the presenter, who play-acts, and elements of the presentation of the opening, which appear to be genuine.

The opening sequence mimics and mocks the Hollywood awards ceremony or, perhaps more accurately, the film premiere—events that are a central part of Hollywood cinema's extra-textual presentational

modes. Thus, comic imitation produces a parody of those features of Hollywood cinema. A crucial way in which this parody works, however, is in the transplanting of these presentational strategies from Los Angeles to London. This is not to suggest that London is intrinsically *not* glamorous, but the way in which the ceremony is transplanted calls attention to the distinction between British attempts at glamour and Hollywood's more 'genuine' glamour. When Johnny Vaughn reaches the inside of the studio, it is empty, evoking the interior of a Friday night chat show rather than a Hollywood awards ceremony. His mode of dress now conflicts with the rather drab background. The transplanting of Hollywood modes of address to a British milieu thus creates a humorous cultural conflict. The mistakes, inadequacies and general incompetence of the programme that follows are all deliberate parts of this process. Simply put, the programme as a British attempt at Hollywood glamour fails on all counts, rendering it a critique of the transplant. The opening suggests that it is somehow false, inferior and perhaps even a little silly to attempt Hollywood's presentational mode in the British context. Through parody, the programme subtly conveys a critique of the medium itself: Hollywood film is fake, low-brow and thus culturally inferior to other types of film. In this way the whole opening minute plays out like a knowing wink—we know that you know that this kind of presentation is asinine, and so are the films with which it is associated. This message will circulate throughout the evening, with varying degrees of explicitness.

This dichotomy between the phoney transplantation of Hollywood and 'real' British television is further satirised during the introductory programme. There are three 'guest appearances' by British film stars which are all in some way faked: Johnny Vaughn introduces an 'endorsement' from Ewan McGregor which, in reality, is merely an unplanned encounter between the FilmFour camera crew and the star. Emily Watson, crying with emotion at the honour of being asked to endorse the channel, is shown to have used onions to produce tears. The clearest and perhaps most humorous use of the false/real binary is an interview with Robert Carlyle, which has been re-edited to make it appear to be a positive endorsement. The interview appears to be a poorly edited version of a 'genuine' interview in which Carlyle has been insulted by the questions, annoyed by the interviewer and becomes aggressive towards the end. This plays on the image of the precious actor, reluctant to cooperate and antagonistic to the script he is asked to read. The faking of this tape makes the producers of the programme appear amateurish and incompetent. However, because the construction is so exaggeratedly bad, the viewer is clearly meant to

realise that this is a fake, and can thus infer that there was collusion on the part of Carlyle. Again, the programme works as a knowing wink. There are two levels of falseness here – this interview is a fake of a fake. What lies underneath is the genuine cooperation of the actor, who has been willing to perform the self-parody. Thus through this fakery, there is real endorsement from a number of stars. The ‘real’ here is the support for FilmFour from British film stars, and the ‘fake’ is the false presentational strategies and the use of stars made by more mainstream outlets. Here the opening night is subtly inferring two things: FilmFour has ‘real’ British stars, and FilmFour will give you unfettered and ‘real’ access to them. Once again, this is juxtaposed with the suggestion that more mainstream modes of presentation are inauthentic and inferior.

In case this message has not been made clear enough, the point is made explicitly by Johnny Vaughn in a monologue. Apparently infuriated by mistakes and mishaps throughout the programme, the presenter finally breaks down and rants in a manner that is supposed to appear spontaneous and unscripted: ‘This is ridiculous! What do we need this set for? All this black tie business? This is FilmFour! Not some cheesy pseudo-Hollywood thing’. Vaughn goes on to extol the virtue of the new channel by emphasising its difference from Hollywood cinema, underlining the point that a channel like FilmFour does not need Hollywood’s spirit of glitz and glamour because it offers an alternative that is more ‘real’. The whole programme undermines, through imitation, the extra-textual features of Hollywood cinema, which feeds into the perception of its being unreal and thus poor quality. And ultimately the programme is a fraud, because it presents itself to the audience ‘as live’ although it has been, in fact, pre-recorded.

The alleged ‘liveness’ of the simulcast is indicated from the outset, as the announcer states: ‘Live from Channel 4’s London headquarters’. Superimposed over the image is a graphic which reads ‘Live’. Liveness is also emulated by the frequent mistakes and miscommunications in the programme. The host attempts to conduct four interviews ‘via satellite’ during the programme: with Brenda Blethyn, Anna Friel, Dougray Scott and Kevin Spacey. In each of these, a breakdown in communication between the studio and the interviewee occurs, forcing Johnny Vaughn to improvise. As in the previous examples, the complicity of the actors involved is clear: errors and technology failures are the benchmark of the live television broadcast. However, it is also abundantly clear that these are not live interviews with the stars, but pre-recorded videotapes integrated into the programme.

There is a certain irony in using a programme that emulates and exploits television's liveness to promote a channel which will never show any 'live' television at all. A film channel is, in fact, a conduit for manifestly 'unlive' content. As William Urrichio argues:

No matter that television as we know it has long since turned from a medium of liveness to a videotape-facilitated time machine, recycling the past and simulating the present; historically, its dominant trope has been a recurrent obsession with liveness, with sensory extension, with the world of the present. (2002: 226)

A channel dedicated exclusively to showing films redoubles this 'videotape-facilitated time machine' function by allowing audiences to visit or revisit films missed at the cinema. Presenting 'as live' complicates the issue of what television is and what it is for: if television is viewed as an alternative means of exhibition for films, as would presumably be the priority of a channel devoted to film presentation, then it is an odd choice to emphasise the specifically televisual quality of liveness. Thus the choice to broadcast 'as live' further complicates the dubious ontology of the television film channel: reproducing 'liveness' to market a channel dedicated to the 'unlive' foregrounds the dichotomy between film as 'unlive' content within television's live flow.

There are, however, good reasons for Channel 4 to present the opening television programme 'as live'. First, the simultaneous broadcast is, historically, a fairly rare occurrence on television, but it is usually used when the event being broadcast occurs live. In a sense, then, the presentation 'as live' follows television conventions for the simulcast. Furthermore, the simulcast is normally used to broadcast special events. Although such events are interruptions and aberrations in the usual televisual flow, liveness adds to their importance because they are taking place *now*, in the moment that they are seen. In other words, the liveness of television is a special characteristic in itself. In the case of the FilmFour opening night, the festive spirit of the 'live' broadcast has been co-opted to increase the specialness of the event. The event is special partly because it is unique – the first (digital) satellite and terrestrial simulcast – but it is also special because it comes direct from Channel 4 headquarters. Or so it seems.

The presentation of the FilmFour opening night as a special occasion was in marked contrast to the opening night of Channel 4 itself in 1982. As Dorothy Hobson records in her extensive analysis of the early years of the channel:

The Opening Night Simulcast of FilmFour on Channel 4

Jeremy Isaacs was determined that the first night on the new channel would be special only in that it was the first night of programming. The schedule did not contain programmes which were different from those which the channel would be offering in its regular schedule. (2008: 24)

The opening night of Channel 4 was intended to make the channel appear as a new but also organic fixture of the television schedules, whereas the FilmFour opening night emphasised the difference between the new channel and what had gone before. Such was the determination of Channel 4's opening evening to give the impression of the start of a regular daily schedule that the first programme ever transmitted was *Countdown*, a fixture of the schedules ever since. The FilmFour opening night similarly promised to give the audience a sense of the content of a regular evening's FilmFour viewing. The distinction here, though, was that it appeared on Channel 4, disrupting the main channel's regular Sunday night programming. The opening night of FilmFour thus presents continuity with Channel 4's traditional way of doing things, but also a significant break with the past. The tone of the opening evening – the evident discomfort with whistles and bells and the great effort made to maintain ironic distance from the mode of presentation that is being employed – reflects this tension.

In fact, much attention was paid throughout the promotion of FilmFour to affirming parallels between the new channel and Channel 4 itself. This emphasis on similarities between the two channels was crucial, because the main message of the simulcast evening was that FilmFour would be different in the same ways that Channel 4 had traditionally been different: by being cutting-edge, rule-breaking and outside the mainstream. An advertisement for FilmFour on the Sky Digital Satellite package, broadcast prior to the opening programme, illustrates this point. The promo is composed of short clips of films to be shown on FilmFour in its opening week, edited together in rapid succession. The clips contain in their very brief duration fast movement (camera movement or movement of figures on camera), bright colours and loud bursts of sound. There is a preponderance of images (around a third of the clips) associated with violence and crime. These features add to the advert's dynamism, underlining the idea of rule-breaking being a central feature of FilmFour. The words of the male voice-over make this point very explicitly, by claiming that FilmFour are the people who 'break taboos when others want to play safe' and who are 'dedicated to pushing boundaries'.

Less explicitly, connections are set up in this advert (and throughout the evening) to a film which, at the time, encapsulated this spirit of

rule-breaking: Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996) which was also one of Channel 4 Films' greatest critical and commercial successes. The film had remained in the cultural consciousness long after it had left cinemas, largely by dint of its extensive (and expensive) promotional campaign.³ As well as the use of clips from *Trainspotting* – of which there are three in just 30 seconds – the background music is Iggy Pop's 'Lust for Life', famously used in the film's soundtrack. Even the Scottish accent of the voice-over performer recalls the milieu of *Trainspotting*, impersonating its star, Ewan McGregor. As David Gritten argued in the *Telegraph* (8 October 1998): 'The channel's motto would appear to be: "If you liked *Trainspotting*, you'll love this." It is skewed towards people who fancy themselves as fans of films with a bit of a cutting edge'. Indeed, Ewan McGregor appears many times during the opening night of FilmFour: he is one of the celebrities who appear as 'guests' in the opening programme, he is the star of *The Pillow Book*, and he even provides an on-screen introduction to a short film, *Desserts*, in which he stars. It is thus not too much of an exaggeration to say that McGregor was exploited by the programme as the 'face' of FilmFour. Part of the reason for this was to invoke the spirit of *Trainspotting* as the representative film of FilmFour – edgy and provocative, but also extremely popular. Thus both the film and McGregor's star persona are exploited to characterise FilmFour (and Channel 4) as cool and cutting-edge.

To complement the launch night of FilmFour, Channel 4 had arranged on the previous evening a large and expensive launch party for the new channel. Held in a converted bus station, the location was kept secret until the day of the party. The party, in both design and guest list, was self-consciously designed to be 'cool', and received wide coverage in the weekend newspapers. In addition, the Natural Nylon production company, co-owned by Jude Law, Sadie Frost, Johnny Lee Miller, Sean Pertwee and Ewan McGregor, produced some of the opening night programming, and these were able to attract the most up-to-date stars to connect themselves with FilmFour. The channel's launch, then, was embedded in a fashionable emerging culture of young British stars and the event clearly reflected the 'Cool Britannia' ethos that was being encouraged and emphasised by the New Labour government. This also helped to strengthen Channel 4's media brand.

As chief executive Michael Jackson noted in the *Independent on Sunday* (8 November 2008), the launch party was designed in part to use 'C4's speciality shock tactics'. Part of the FilmFour image, then, was a sense that the channel would take risks and 'shock' its subscribers. This idea of risk-taking film fits in with the launch's general theme

of separation from Hollywood, of definition by difference. Moreover, by using a crossover star like Ewan McGregor as the face of the new channel, the concept of 'independent' cinema proposed by the channel is kept within recognisable boundaries. As a channel manager interviewed by Georgina Born noted:

Our realization was that to the audience, 'independent film' doesn't mean anything ... But there was an audience we thought was complementary, which *wasn't* saying, 'I go to the [British Film Institute] and I want to see independent films', but who *were* saying, 'Yes, I do like some Hollywood films, but I like films that are a bit more interesting; I hate it when they're formulaic. I like the clever, independent, cutting-edge films Channel 4 does.' We tried to position it in a way that would engage an audience who felt they weren't being served either by terrestrial TV or by pay TV. (2003: 787)

So, while the evening and the surrounding promotional material employs the rhetoric of risk-taking and shock tactics, FilmFour's actual content was designed to be different, but not *too* different. The main distinction between FilmFour's output and that of, for example, Sky Movies, is that FilmFour's movies are cool, cutting-edge and 'quality'. The crucial thing, then, was to attract a particular kind of audience to the channel, one that would be inclined to concur with the designation of FilmFour's content as 'quality' and in opposition to Hollywood.

Johnny Vaughn summarised the self-proposed 'remit' of FilmFour to the audience of the opening night programme as 'Quality, quality and, er, quality'. 'Quality' is used here not to promise the provision of up-to-date popular or expensive movies, as it might on other movie channels. Instead, the FilmFour promotion emphasises rather high-brow ideas about 'quality' films as defined by the kind of cinema viewed at the arthouse or repertory cinema. This statement, from the week's *Radio Times*, makes this more or less explicit: 'FilmFour ... will be wooing not so much the multiplex-goer as the seasoned arthouse aficionado. "It'll be like having a repertory cinema in your own living room", says press officer David Shaw' (Middleton 1998: 57). Here the sites of cinema-going are used as synecdoches for the kinds of films shown there and, in turn, the kind of person likely to want to view the film. The multiplex is supposedly for those with less discerning taste, the mainstream audience being assumed to be most interested in Hollywood movies – and this is the audience at which Sky Movies is, generally speaking, targeted. FilmFour, then, by aligning itself with the arthouse, is aiming at a more discriminating audience.

Thus the discourse of taste surrounding FilmFour is that of the film connoisseur rather than the film fan, the film buff rather than the movie-goer. The opening night's address to an audience of cinephiles is extended through frequent reference to cinema-going as a cultural activity and to the idea of a 'cinema in your home'. A series of short talking heads by film actors and celebrities recalling memories of cinema-going, called *Cinema Stories* was broadcast between the films. These play on the nostalgia of the audience for the experience and enjoyment of going to the cinema. Brenda Blethyn's *Cinema Story* is particularly interesting. She recounts trips to the cinema as a child, in which the programmes were continuous and she would arrive in the morning and stay watching the same film repeatedly, much to her mother's chagrin. Her description of being hypnotised by *Calamity Jane* (1953), to the point at which she had to be forcibly removed from the cinema by her mother, offers an interesting parallel to the experience of watching a film channel on television. The viewing of the one-time continuous programmes of films in cinemas is analogous to the film channel through which films 'flow' one after another. As in the case of emphasising television's liveness, there is an irony in using nostalgic, locale-based cinephilia as a selling point for a television channel. The fact that these are distant memories perhaps even suggests a kind of lost enjoyment that can be reproduced through the facsimile cinephiliac exercise of watching a 'quality' film channel. Indeed, prior to the opening of FilmFour, some film enthusiasts had expressed anxiety about the idea that it might replace truly cinephiliac activities. For example, in the *Sunday Times* (*Culture Section*, 1 November 1998), the author Benjamin Woolley was quoted to the effect that:

It's not going to be the same. The thrill of the cinema is in queuing for the ticket and having the lights go down and seeing a film on the big screen. I'm glad that Channel 4 is doing this, but I still miss the days when you could see these films at the cinema. (Armstrong 1998)

The gesture towards cinephilia as an identity is a powerful means of outlining and separating the audience for FilmFour. The idea was that with independent and non-mainstream distribution perpetually under threat, and arthouse cinemas available only to those cinema enthusiasts able to access them, FilmFour was to offer an alternative exhibition space for quality films. But what kind of 'quality' was proposed?

The opening evening repeatedly defines 'great films' with the mantra 'classic films, cult films, independent films and foreign films'. This is repeated throughout the interstitial advertising and during Johnny Vaughn's monologues to camera. But these specific claims

to quality are debatable when taking into account the actual output of the FilmFour channel in its first week. For example, in terms of providing 'foreign films', two thirds of the films shown that week were either from the US or Britain. Similarly, the claim that the channel would show 'classic films' is also dubious, since only a quarter of the films shown were made before 1980. Of course, 'classic' here refers not only to the period in which they were made but also to a more abstract sense of the films belonging to a 'canon' of classics. But how this canon is prescribed or measured is not, and does not have to be, clear. It is not the truth of the claims to quality that is interesting, but how the claims are proposed. The version of 'quality' – classic, cult, independent and foreign – gels with the desires of the anticipated audience for the channel: a middle-class audience that desires an 'alternative', a television arthouse. This distinction between the 'multiplex and the arthouse' is further made clear by a list of generic negatives presented by Johnny Vaughn to the audience of the opening night programme: 'No mindless blockbusters, no inane action romps and certainly none of that straight to video rubbish'. These genres are, apparently, uncomplicatedly low-quality, populist and 'rubbish'.

If quality is here defined by era, nation of origin and genre, there is another, slightly subtler, discourse of quality which can be identified from the opening night promotion: a quality which is gendered as male. I am not interested here in making general or essentialist claims about the tastes of particular genders, only to note that the address of the evening is quite specifically male-oriented. This manifests itself, for instance, in the genders of the stars in the opening night selection of films: there are eleven male stars in comparison to just two female stars. Thus, David Gritten in the *Telegraph* (8 October 1998) suggests that 'the bad news is that FilmFour (initially at least) seems to favour amoral, violent contemporary movies starring cool young dudes'. There is a masculinisation of address here which implies that 'quality' and male-oriented tastes are somehow inherently linked. We can perceive a masculine bias in the genres that are emphasised in the promotions on the opening night: the thriller, the gangster film, and science fiction. There is a structuring *lack* of appeal to feminine pleasures. The films emphasised are rarely of the genres deemed 'women's pictures', such as romance or melodrama.

The host, Johnny Vaughn, was also well known for his laddish presentational style, while the short programme *Adam and Joe's FilmFour Special* further adds to this appeal to a young male audience. Based on the Channel 4 comedy sketch show *The Adam and Joe Show*

(1996–2001), the programme is presented by two twentysomething men from their bedroom. Adam and Joe discuss the advent of the FilmFour channel as an event, and the arrival of digital television in general, in a sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek manner. This is the same kind of ‘knowing wink’ that I previously noted in the opening programme – an acknowledgement of a savvy, self-conscious viewer – with Adam and Joe, ironic young men watching and commenting on TV from their bedroom, representing in many ways the audience to which this opening night promotion, and FilmFour as a whole, is addressed.

This audience is comprised of the likely demographic to which the brand of Channel 4/ FilmFour would appeal. However, as argued earlier, constructing a specific brand image and encouraging audience identification with this brand necessitates the exclusion of sections of the television audience that do not fit the brand identity. Whilst Channel 4’s mandate to target niche publics accommodates this turn to a particular audience, its tradition of catering to a wide *range* of minority audiences was, at this stage in its history, breaking down. The specific address of FilmFour to a target audience of young, affluent males can be seen as an example of a wider trend at Channel 4, where its (anyway somewhat paradoxical) tradition of widespread niche targeting was being replaced by an appeal to already privileged demographics. For a public service broadcaster, even one with the history and traditions of Channel 4, this was a risky and, to a certain extent, politically irresponsible strategy.

During the course of the evening, emphasis is placed on the audience, who are addressed in the second person. The frequent repetition of ‘you’ and ‘for you’ suggests a direct (and universal) address to the audience. In one of the many promos screened during the evening, a voice-over tells us what FilmFour is ‘for’, with ‘for you’ being the most prominent; and Johnny Vaughn in one of his monologues describes ‘quality’ as FilmFour’s primary remit *to you*. Because the evening was simultaneously broadcast on a terrestrial channel, this ‘you’ encompasses a very broad audience. The language of ‘for you’ and ‘remit’ recalls the status of Channel 4 as a public service broadcaster, with a duty to provide the best for all its viewers. However, FilmFour compromises that remit by addressing and delineating, with varying degrees of explicitness, a particular version of ‘you’ that the channel is for. ‘You’ are male, middle-class, educated and discerning, with an above-average income. This kind of viewer, the ABC1 consumer, was very similar to the increasingly targeted core audience of the main channel. There are potential political pitfalls for a public service broadcaster making such a direct and explicit

play to an already advantaged audience. As Born suggests: 'Above all, there is a tension between the attention given to youth and upmarket audiences and the universality principle at the heart of PSB' (2003: 791). Of course, this 'universality principle' had always been challenged by Channel 4. One of the channel's key contributions to public service broadcasting had been to win the argument for public service broadcasters to address specific sections of the public with their programming. Another key part of the channel's original remit was, as Jeremy Isaacs famously put it, to be a channel that 'everyone will watch some of the time and no one all of the time' (quoted in Brown 2007: 22). But FilmFour was to be a channel that some people would watch frequently, but that most of the public would never be *able* to watch. Its promotional material was not only self-conscious about this exclusion, it was even used to market the channel to its target audience.

From an economic perspective it appeared necessary for the new channel to be tailored in this way. A pay-TV channel requires viewers not just for the purpose of political justification, but for financial viability. The address to a particular kind of 'you' reflects the channel's need to define itself by difference and in opposition to the other kinds of film entertainment already on offer on multi-channel television. To serve this purpose, elements that could be perceived as weaknesses of the channel – such as showing films that aren't recent, aren't Hollywood and aren't 'popular' – are, throughout the opening night simulcast, re-branded as 'classic', 'independent' and 'cult'. The linguistic turn here exemplifies how the definition of 'quality' with which the channel was operating actually refers to specific and class-based discourses of value.

The pay-TV funding model, which had been such a prominent part of Channel 4's strategy under Michael Jackson and his successor, Mark Thompson, was subsequently abandoned when Andy Duncan took over as chief executive in 2004. Duncan first moved E4, the youth-oriented former subscription channel, onto the Freeview digital terrestrial platform in May 2005. This meant, on the one hand, switching to an advertiser-supported model, which was risky in a period of turbulent fortunes in television advertising. On the other hand, the channel now had the potential to attract viewers from another 8 million Freeview homes (Brown 2007: 297). A similar approach was taken with the FilmFour channel in July 2006, when it was rebranded Film4, carried as an advertiser-supported channel on Freeview, and went free-to-air on digital satellite and cable platforms. This prompted an extensive promotional campaign, in which famous film actors gamely played along to promote the channel in advertising

skits, such as one in which Judi Dench and Ewan McGregor (again!) dressed up as a lobster and a tomato. As with E4, Film4's potential viewing audience exponentially increased from a subscriber base which had stagnated at around 300,000. However, as Maggie Brown suggests, 'it was not the same channel: its tone changed as it had to observe the 9 p.m. watershed and add lengthy advertising breaks' (2007: 300). Thus the carefully constructed 'alternative' image of FilmFour was gradually broken down. In its current formulation, Film4 may no longer have the edge of its antecedent subscriber channel, but it still has the distinction of being the only free-to-air film-only channel on the Freeview platform. Most importantly, as part of the Channel 4 portfolio of digital channels, Film4 helps the corporation to maintain a decent overall digital audience share.

When it was launched, the FilmFour channel represented the first part of a long-term strategy for Channel 4 to establish its brand on digital television. The corporation began to position itself as the (digital) alternative to the norm. This required an address to an audience that is dissatisfied with what is already offered to them. In terms of film products, this audience is congruent with that to which arthouse cinema appeals. Through parody and humour, the opening night simulcast proposed that what was already on offer was tacky, low-brow and inauthentic. Defined in opposition to this, FilmFour was presented as an attractive choice to a particular type of film viewer who had hitherto been sidelined by pay-TV. As part of the Channel 4 brand, FilmFour could extend the corporation's reputation for being edgy, risky and different into the new terrain of digital television. However, this required a modification of the traditionally conceived audience for Channel 4 from a heterogeneous, wide-ranging public to a specific and privileged demographic. This was the corporation's first step into the digital terrain, but a step away from the public service values that had originally made Channel 4 so unique.

Appendix

Opening night schedule, FilmFour/Channel 4, 1 November 1998

19.00–19.15 *FilmFour Launch*: 'as live' introductory programme presented by Johnny Vaughn. Features guest appearances by film actors interspersed with promotional clips for the new FilmFour channel

19.15–21.20 *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* (1994): American film directed by Lasse Hallström and starring Johnny Depp, Leonardo DiCaprio and Juliette Lewis

21.20–21.30 *Adam and Joe's FilmFour Special*: includes the puppet spoof, *Toytanic*

21.30–22.00 *Nothing is What it Seems*: making-of documentary on *The Usual Suspects* (1995) featuring interviews with cast and crew

The Opening Night Simulcast of FilmFour on Channel 4

22.00–00.00 *The Usual Suspects*: British television premiere of the thriller starring Gabriel Byrne, Kevin Spacey and Benicio del Toro

00.00–00.10 *Desserts*: British short film introduced by and starring Ewan McGregor

00.10–02.30 *The Pillow Book* (1996): British/French/Dutch co-production of Peter Greenaway's erotic drama starring Ewan McGregor and Vivian Wu

02.30–04.25 *Caro Diario/Dear Diary* (1996): autobiographical Italian film starring and directed by Nanni Moretti.

Notes

1. BARB website: http://www.barb.co.uk/facts/multiChannelDevelopment?_s=4 (accessed on 20 March 2010).
2. The cost of a Sky television package ranged from between £19.99 to £30 per month, with start-up costs of around £200 for installation. However, Sky packages delivered up to 200 channels for the price of the subscription. The Sky Movies package cost £8 per month.
3. According to *The Numbers* website, the film's prints and advertising spend exceeded its production budget by \$1 million: <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/1996/0TRAI.php> (accessed 29 October 2011).

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